

# THE CALL OF MOSES

## Part II

EDWARD J. YOUNG

**I**F THE burning bush is to be understood as a genuine miracle, it is well to ask what its significance is. The miracles of the Bible were designed to be signs and attestations of God's plan of redemption. In what sense, then, did the burning bush point to God's redemptive activity?

According to Acts 7:30 the events described in Exodus 3 took place forty years after Moses' flight into the land of Midian. Emphasis falls immediately upon Moses and the fact that he was shepherding (the participle expresses continual occupation) the flock of Jethro. In the desert itself there was apparently not enough vegetation for the flock, so Moses led the flock beyond the desert. This would imply that when he had come to Horeb, he was no longer in the desert. Indeed, if we are to identify the mountain with Jebel el-Musa or Jebel es-Sufsafeh we can well understand why the plain Er-rahah would have been sought after by a shepherd. Even today there is considerable water in this location.<sup>1</sup>

To assume that the mountain was regarded as a sanctuary even before the revelation to Moses is unwarranted.<sup>2</sup> The designation, "mountain of God", is merely used by anticipa-

<sup>1</sup> For a description cf. Franklin E. Hoskins: *From the Nile to Nebo*, Philadelphia, 1912, pp. 203, 204; Arthur Penrhyn Stanley: *Sinai and Palestine*, New York, 1857, pp. 17-20; D. A. Randall: *The Handwriting of God in Egypt, Sinai and the Holy Land*, Philadelphia, 1862, p. 310; L. Prévost: *Le Sinai hier . . . aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1936, pp. 254 ff.; Heinz Skrobucha: *Sinai*, translated by Geoffrey Hunt, London, 1966 gives an excellent history of the peninsula; Beno Rothenberg: *God's Wilderness*, New York, 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 2:12:1, strangely remarks, τοῦτο (i. e., Mt. Sinai) δ' ἐστὶν ὑψηλότατον τῶν ταύτη ὄρων καὶ πρὸς νομὰς ἄριστον, ἀγαθῆς φουμένης πόας καὶ διὰ τὸ δόξαν ἔχειν ἐνδιατρίβειν αὐτῷ τὸν θεὸν οὐ κατανεμηθείσης πρότερον, οὐ τολμώντων ἐμβατεύειν εἰς αὐτὸ τῶν ποιμένων.

tion, and there is no reason for supposing that Moses was expecting a revelation or that he came to seek such.<sup>3</sup> The whole emphasis of verse one falls upon the ordinary, earthly task of Moses. He was a shepherd and he was concerned for the welfare of his sheep.<sup>4</sup> Inasmuch as there was water near Horeb, that is where he brought his flock. The Rabbis may not have been wrong when they declared that God first tested Moses in small things so that he might later be suited to serve in greater tasks.<sup>5</sup> He who could faithfully be a shepherd in Midian could serve in the exalted position which God was preparing for him in the divine economy.

Why, however, is the mountain here named Horeb and not Sinai? The most likely answer is that Horeb and Sinai are simply two different names of the same mountain, just as Hermon and Sirion both designate Mt. Hermon (*cf.* Deuteronomy 3:9; Psalm 29:6). Why this was so we do not know, nor do we know why Horeb is sometimes used and sometimes Sinai. Conceivably one might fit into the rhythm of a verse better than the other. That the difference is due to euphonic reasons, however, is merely conjecture. Certainly it is not due to the predilections of supposed authors of documents. Nor can the presence of these words serve as evidence of difference in document.<sup>6</sup>

Exodus 3:1 is generally attributed to J, but inasmuch as its final clause contains the word *Horeb*, the "critics" would excise this clause and attribute it to E. Thus, 3:1 is a composite, 3:1a, b<sup>a</sup> belonging to J and 3:1b<sup>b</sup> to E. The last clause is essential, however, to the narrative for it gives the locale

<sup>3</sup> George A. Barton: *Semitic and Hamitic Origins*, Philadelphia, 1934, pp. 334, 335 holds that Moses was psychologically prepared for a message from the god of the volcano.

<sup>4</sup> Dillmann: *Die Bücher Exodus und Leviticus*<sup>2</sup>, Leipzig, 1880, p. 24, quotes Burckhardt to the effect that with the approach of summer the Bedouin of the peninsula leave the lower regions and move to the higher districts where the pasture remains fresh for a longer time.

<sup>5</sup> *Cf.* the comments in *The Soncino Edition of the Pentateuch and Haphtaroth*<sup>2</sup>, ed. J. H. Hertz, London, 1966, p. 213 (hereafter designated Soncino).

<sup>6</sup> Acts 7:30 speaks of ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ. Inasmuch as Sinai appears six times in Exodus 19 (generally attributed to E), Horeb can hardly be regarded as a characteristic of E.

where the revelation is to occur and it also points out the destination that Moses had in mind in leading his flock beyond the wilderness.

#### THE ANGEL OF THE LORD IN THE BUSH

Having given the locale for the revelation, the narrator now relates the fact of the revelation itself. This is mentioned before there is any hint of a burning bush, for what is essential for an understanding of all that follows is the fact that God has been seen by Moses. The One who appears to Moses is the "angel of the Lord". According to Jewish tradition this figure is to be distinguished from God Himself, for he is merely God's messenger and speaks in God's Name.<sup>7</sup> The thought and will behind the words are God's, but the actual words and deeds are said to be those of the messenger himself.

As the text stands, however, it clearly identifies the Angel with God. The Angel appeared unto Moses in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush, and God called to Moses from the midst of the bush. Furthermore, the manner in which the LORD is introduced as one who sees that Moses had turned aside suggests that the LORD and the Angel are one. How is this to be explained?

Martin Noth apparently looks with favor upon the explanation given by Von Rad, who declares that the Angel is God in human form, a form in which Yahweh appears. This result, however, has been achieved by means of intensive inner revising of very old traditions. These traditions told about unique and spectacular divine appearances at definite shrines and sites. Later on men came to assume that it was an Angel of Yahweh that thus appeared, and in this way they broke down the naive immediate intimacy of God's relationship. They introduced this mediating figure, the Angel of the Lord, and yet at the same time preserved the directness of God's address to man and of His saving activity. Von Rad acknowledges that there are Christological "qualities" in this figure and that it is a type or "shadow" of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> E. g., *Soncino*, p. 213.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Noth: *Exodus*, Philadelphia, 1962. Von Rad writes (*Das erste*

Is the "Angel", however, to be accounted for as the product of theological reflection? What would have led men to introduce this mediating figure into old traditions which spoke of an immediate appearance of God? And what evidence is there for such an assumption? Is there really extant evidence to support the idea that we have here the product of revision of ancient traditions? And if the introduction of the Angel into the picture is merely the result of theological reflection, how, possibly, can the Angel be a type of Jesus Christ? If the Angel actually did appear to Moses, as Scripture says he did, then He can be a type of Christ; but if He is merely a shadowy figure, the product of the human imagination, how can he typify the Mediator par excellence?

In the exegetical sphere Von Rad is correct as far as his interpretation of the text is concerned, but he enters the realm of fancy when he speaks of revising ancient traditions. The Angel is a real Being, and He is to be identified with God. Inasmuch as He is sent from the Lord, He is not God the Father Himself but distinct from the Father. If we would do justice to the Scriptural data, we must insist therefore both upon the distinguishableness of the Angel from the Father and also upon the identity of essence with the Father. Christian theologians have rightly seen in this strange Figure a prein-

---

*Buch Mose*, Göttingen, 1953, pp. 163–164), "Der Engel des Herrn ist dann also eine Erscheinungsform Jahwes. Er ist Gott selbst in menschlicher Gestalt. Dieses merkwürdige Schillern zwischen einem göttlichen und einem menschlichen Subjekt — die Alten haben geradezu von einer Zwei-naturenlehre gesprochen! — ist das gewiss nicht ungewollte Ergebnis einer offenbar intensiven inneren Verarbeitung sehr alten Überlieferungen. Es handelt sich nämlich in diesen Fällen um alte Orts- und Heiligtumsüberlieferungen, die in älterer Fassung einmal ganz direkt von höchst sinnfälligen Gotteserscheinungen an bestimmten Orten berichtet haben. Die Späteren haben das dann so verstehen wollen, dass nicht Jahwe, sondern der Engel Jahwes erschienen ist. So steht hinter der Einführung des Engels des Herrn in jene alten Kulttraditionen wohl schon eine ausgesprochene theologische Reflexion. Die naive Unmittelbarkeit des Gottesverhältnisses ist durch die Einführung dieser Mittlergestalt einigermassen gebrochen, ohne dass doch damit der Direktheit der göttlichen Anrede und des göttlichen Heilshandelns an den Menschen etwas abgebrochen wurde. Die Gestalt des Engels des Herrn hat auffällige christologische Züge. Nach Kap. 48, 16 wird er als der bezeichnet, der von allem Leid erlöst. Er ist ein Typus, ein Schatten 'Jesu Christi'."

carnate appearance of the One who in the days of His flesh could say, "And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness of me" (John 5:37).<sup>9</sup> This One is indeed a messenger to bring to Moses the announcement of deliverance to come.

Calvin may be mentioned as representative of a common interpretation of the significance of the miracle. In the bush, he holds, we see the humble and despised people surrounded by the flames of oppression; yet in the midst is God who prevents the flames from devouring the nation.<sup>10</sup> Keil appeals to Judges 9:15 to support the position that in contrast to the more noble and lofty trees the thornbush aptly represents the people of God in their humiliation.<sup>11</sup> On this particular point there seems to be fairly widespread agreement among interpreters.<sup>12</sup>

Is it, however, correct to say that the fire stands for oppression? According to Keil, appealing to 1 Corinthians 3:11 ff., the fire, considered as burning and consuming, figuratively represents refining affliction and destroying punishment.<sup>13</sup> It must be noted, however, that the Angel of the Lord is said to have appeared in a flame of fire. The fire, therefore, it would seem, is not the iron furnace of Egypt (Deuteronomy 4:20), but is rather to be understood as a symbol of the burning zeal of God. Inasmuch as this fire burns the bush, it signifies the pure holiness of God which comes in judgment and devours whatever is impure. Nevertheless, the fire, although it burns, does not consume. The sin of the people could call

<sup>9</sup> Cf., e. g., Geerhardus Vos: *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, Grand Rapids, 1948, pp. 85-89.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin: "... the ancient teachers of the Church have rightly understood that the Eternal Son of God is so called in respect to his office as Mediator, which he figuratively bore from the beginning, although he really took it upon him only at his Incarnation". *Harmony of the Four Last Books of the Pentateuch*, Grand Rapids, 1950, Vol. I, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> Keil and Delitzsch: *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, 1949, Vol. I, p. 438. It must be noted, however, that the word  $\text{תִּצְרֹף}$  is used, not  $\text{תִּצְרֹף}$ .

<sup>12</sup> Th. Schmalenbach: *Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg*, Gütersloh, 1892, Vol. III, p. 374, "Das geringe, verachtete, unterdrückte Volk Gottes — das ist der Dornbusch. Sachlich sind, die zerschlagenen und niedrigen Geistes sind, das Thörichte und Unedle gemeint, Jes. 57, 15; I Cor. 1, 26-29".

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 438.

forth the punitive wrath of God; but the fire does not consume, for God has promised salvation to this very despised and lowly slave people. In the midst of the Israelites, the despised slaves of Egypt, dwells the holy LORD himself, whose zeal would consume whatever is not pure yet who does not devour, for His intentions are of grace toward His chosen people.<sup>24</sup> Thus, as so often in the Old Testament, judgment and salvation are linked together and go hand in hand.

That the Lord dwells in the midst of His people is a thought which finds emphasis in the twice-mentioned phrase, "from the midst of the bush". It is this thought which prepares the way for the revelation of God as the God of the fathers. He who had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was at this very moment, despite the lowly condition of the people, in their midst. Nor had He ever deserted them. God had taken up His abode in their midst and would never abandon them. Even when He must bring judgment, He is in their midst. They cannot find Him by turning to the gods of Egypt, but must look for His presence among themselves. Thus, the miracle of the burning bush, among other things, both strengthens Moses' faith in the presence of God with His people and prepares him to understand that this God, who is now in their midst, is the same God who spoke to the fathers.

#### THE RESPONSE OF MOSES

To this wondrous sight of the burning bush Moses responds. The words, "And Moses said", in verse three do not suggest that Moses spoke the following words aloud, but merely indicate that they were the thoughts which passed through his mind. Moses recognizes that what he sees is a "great sight", and hence something out of the ordinary. Had it been merely the glistening of the berries of a bush in the sun or the campfire of the shepherds, or anything of similar nature, Moses could hardly have considered it a "a great sight". It is noteworthy also that the only reason for Moses' turning aside is that he

<sup>24</sup> Schmalenbach: *op. cit.*, p. 374, "Das Gesicht von dem brennenden und doch nicht verbrennenden Busche (2 Mos. 3, 1-8) stellt die grosse Wahrheit der Unzerstörbarkeit der Gnade Gottes gegen seine Gemeinde inmitten aller Trübsal dar".

is moved by curiosity. He sees something unusual, which he designates a "great sight", and he does not know what it is. He turns aside from his regular course simply to discover the explanation of the unusual phenomenon, the like of which he has never before seen at the base of the mountain.

It is this fact of Moses' curiosity which rules out once and for all the idea that Moses, because of long meditation upon the suffering of his people in Egypt, is in a frame of mind or attitude in which he could readily believe that a voice was speaking to him. The late George A. Barton, for example, maintained that as Moses was alone with the flock in the desert he spent the time brooding upon the "acute problems of life as he had experienced it".<sup>15</sup> Among these thoughts were considerations of the nature of the "desert god" that his father-in-law, Jethro, served. The mountain was volcanic, and its smoke and flames expressed the wrath of the desert god, Yahweh, whose presence was indicated by the smoke of the volcano.<sup>16</sup> The Kenites, who worshipped Yahweh, were victorious in war, for they could make metal weapons, whereas their enemies had weapons of flint, arrows and stones. As Moses drew near the mountain to obtain a better view of the strange sight of a bush on fire, he seemed to hear a voice. "This was a religious experience as genuinely real as that which any prophet ever had, and its main elements shine out still through the phraseology of later tradition. That phraseology assumes the results of historical processes which we now know to have been later, but the religious emotional brooding over the problems of himself and his people, and the sudden conviction that this powerful god of the desert, in whose territory he had himself found asylum, had sent him to rescue his people, bears all the marks of psychological reality, and alone accounts for the subsequent career of Moses".<sup>17</sup>

What took place, according to Barton, was the psychological experience known as an "audition". "In all parts of

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>16</sup> Inasmuch as the Sinai peninsula is not volcanic, advocates of the theory that the theophany was related to volcanic action usually seek to locate the mountain in Midian, east of the peninsula.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 335. I have discussed the Kenite Hypothesis in "The God of Horeb", *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. X, 1938, pp. 10-29.

the world and in all religions men of a certain type of psychic constitution, after seeking for the solution of a religious problem and brooding long over it, have found their problem solved in a flash of insight so sudden and clear that they have seemed to hear a voice uttering the words in which their thought took shape".<sup>18</sup>

One may well ask as he ponders Barton's explanation how it is possible to know what type of psychic constitution Moses possessed and what he was thinking as he tended his sheep in the desert. If we are to judge from some of the incidents recorded in the Pentateuch, Moses was a man of decisive action.<sup>19</sup> What his particular "psychic" constitution was we simply do not know. Nor do we know what problems occupied his thoughts as he wandered alone in the desert.

Furthermore, there is not the slightest evidence that the mountain of God was a volcano. If, however, it had been a volcano, Moses would have been so familiar with flames shooting forth from it that he would not have supposed that one such flame was a bush burning yet not consumed. How conceivably could a shooting flame seem like a bush on fire? Possibly one who did not know the desert might come to such a conclusion, although it is a situation difficult to understand; but when a man had spent forty years in the desert, it is asking too much of one's credulity to expect him to believe that such a man might mistake a shooting flame of fire for a burning bush.<sup>20</sup>

It must further be noted that, even if Moses had been pondering the sufferings of his people and even if he were in a psychological frame of mind to receive a revelation or an audition, that frame of mind would completely have been shattered when he discovered that, after all, there was nothing unusual with respect to the bush. Indeed, the very sight of the bush which seemed to be burning without being consumed might itself well have destroyed such a psychological frame or condition of mind. Instead, Moses' mind would have become filled with curiosity as to the explanation of the strange

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 333.

<sup>19</sup> *Cf.*, e. g., Exodus 2:11 ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Cf.* the comments in note 33, "The Call of Moses", *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, May, 1967, pp. 132, 133.



phenomenon before him. In place of being deeply moved by thoughts of the condition of the Israelites, his mind would have become filled with thoughts as to why the bush was burning and yet did not burn up. And, indeed, if we allow the Scripture any credence at all, it was precisely such thoughts which did occupy his mind. "I shall now turn aside, that I may see this great sight, why the bush does not burn". Curiosity filled Moses' mind, not thoughts of his people's need. It was not exactly the frame of mind suitable for the reception of an "audition".

More important and significant than any of the considerations hitherto adduced is the fact that, if Dr. Barton's explanation of the events at the burning bush is correct, not only the work of Moses but the entire subsequent history of Israel are founded, not upon a genuine revelation from God, but upon Moses' mistaken conviction, that God had appeared to him and charged him to deliver the people from Egypt. If God actually did appear to Moses, as Exodus relates, that is one thing. The entire subsequent history of Israel is then filled with meaning and is capable of explanation. If, on the other hand, it is simply founded upon Moses' conviction that God appeared to him and upon nothing more than that, the picture is entirely different. It is one thing to say, to take another example, that the Christian Church is founded upon the belief of the apostles that Jesus Christ rose from the dead; it is something entirely different to assert that the Christian Church is founded upon the fact that Jesus Christ actually did rise from the dead.

This is the crux of the issue. No matter how compelling the conviction of Moses may have been, if it were not based upon fact, the subsequent events would remain without adequate explanation. If the foundation of all that follows is simply the conviction of Moses, then the history of Israel is founded upon man and upon man alone. Very different, however, is the case if God did appear to Moses and the burning bush was a miracle. Then, and then alone, we may say that the subsequent history of the nation of Israel is based upon a revelation of God. It is then the work of God and not of man.

There remains, however, another objection which men raise against accepting the text of Exodus as it stands. We are

told by recent writers that the ancient Israelites would not have asked whether the burning bush was miraculous or merely an unusual natural phenomenon. They had no basis, we are told, for making a distinction between what was wonderful and yet ordinary and what, on the other hand, was miraculous.<sup>21</sup> All of God's works were wonderful, and the modern distinction between the miraculous and the non-miraculous was one which they did not make. This is so, we are told, even if the burning bush actually was a miracle.

In answer to this contention we need not stress the distinctive vocabulary which has to do with signs and wonders and distinctive events. The Hebrew words do indeed point to certain events which were performed by God's power in the external world, which in their appearance<sup>22</sup> were contrary to God's ordinary and even unusual providential working, and which were clearly designed as signs and attestations of the plan of redemption. The signs and wonders, for example, which God performed upon Pharaoh were miraculous events, and could easily have been distinguished from even extraordinary events of providence.

With respect to the burning bush, we must insist that the objection which we are now engaged in considering does not hold. At first, it is true, the bush probably appeared to Moses as a wonderful event of providence. Were that not so, he would not have turned aside to examine it. Even from the distance where he was he could discern that the bush was burning yet did not burn up, and to discover the reason for this was the cause of his turning aside. At the least, he would have considered this a wonderful event of providence.

When the revelation was given to him, however, Moses would have realized that the Lord was performing in the burning bush a sign or wonder which was unique. Were he

<sup>21</sup> This idea has recently appeared in the attractive study of James Plastaras: *The God of Exodus*, Milwaukee, 1966, pp. 65, 66.

<sup>22</sup> *I. e.*, as they appeared to man. What Moses saw as he beheld the burning bush, for example, was a phenomenon which appeared to be contrary to the other phenomena with which he had experience. In the light of the definition of miracle which we have just given in the body of the text, the reader will find it very profitable to make a careful study of the usage of such words as מִוֶּשֶׁת, מִוֶּשֶׁת, מִוֶּשֶׁת and מִוֶּשֶׁת.

to ponder the nature of the event, he would have been compelled to conclude that God, the all powerful one, was causing the bush to burn and yet not permitting it to be consumed. And he would well have understood that this event was designed by God to be an attestation of His plan of salvation. For the Lord explicitly stated to Moses that He had remembered His people and the covenant made with the fathers and had come down to deliver them. Moses, therefore, irrespective of the terminology he might have employed, would have placed this event in an entirely different category from a manifestation of St. Elmo's fire or anything of similar import. A miracle is not merely an event that appears to be contrary to what one ordinarily meets in life, but it is also an act which Almighty God performs to attest His plan of redemption. It behooves us to be cautious about asserting that the Israelites would not have distinguished between the miraculous and the merely wonderful.

Not only does the miracle attest the present working of God but it also points to the continuity of His working in His determination to accomplish redemption. The revelation which accompanies the miracle first looks back to the promises made to the patriarchs, "I am the God of thy father" (Exodus 3:6a), and it also points to the future, "And I came down to deliver it from the hand of Egypt" (Exodus 3:8a). This particular miracle, therefore, was for the benefit of Moses primarily, that through it he might become convinced that the God who had spoken to his ancestors was in the midst of His people and would be faithful to His promise to redeem them.

#### THE GOD OF THY FATHER

In this narrative emphasis falls upon the initiative of God. Moses is not seeking a revelation, nor does he have any intention of drawing near to a "holy place" in the hope of meeting God. He is simply engaged in his ordinary daily business when God approaches him. This factor also is characteristic in the performance of a miracle. God comes to man to convince man that He is man's Redeemer. Hence, the address, "Moses, Moses". Perhaps there is some merit in the old

Jewish interpretation to the effect that the repetition of the name was for the sake of encouraging Moses and indicating affection toward him. Both Abraham and Jacob had been similarly addressed (*cf.* Genesis 22:11 and 46:2).<sup>23</sup>

Some writers assume without argument that Moses came to a holy place. Thus, Noth remarks, "It is therefore probable that here too we are dealing with an original local tradition to which the 'holy ground' concerned was still known as such at a later period" (p. 39).<sup>24</sup> Plastaras at least seeks to give some evidence for adopting this view. He appeals to the definiteness of the word "mountain" in the phrase "mountain of God" (verse one) and to the use of the technical word "holy place" (*i. e.*, *mā-qôm*) in verse five.<sup>25</sup> This evidence, he thinks, suggests that the place was already a sanctuary, although Moses himself may not have been aware of that fact. With respect to the definiteness of the word "mountain" we would simply remark that the word is used to express the point of view of Moses, the writer of the Pentateuch.<sup>26</sup> At the time when this passage was written down, the events herein described had already occurred. What would be more natural than to speak of the mountain where God had appeared to His people as "the mountain of God"?

To say the least it is questionable whether the word *mā-qôm* is here employed in a technical sense. What other suitable word for "place" appears in biblical Hebrew? Whether it is used technically or in a specialized sense in a given context, only that context can decide. In the present passage there is nothing to indicate a specialized usage. Rather, the addition of the words "whereon thou standest" would seem to suggest that the reference is merely to a particular spot. If the word "*mā-qôm*" in itself denotes a sacred place, is it not redundant to say, "the sacred place whereon thou standest is holy ground"? Would it not have been sufficient merely to tell Moses that he was standing upon a *mā-qôm*? The mere men-

<sup>23</sup> *Cf. Soncino*, p. 214.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> We have given evidence for holding that Moses was the writer of the Pentateuch in *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, 1954, pp. 47-51.

tion of the word itself should in that case have been sufficient to have informed Moses that the place was sacred.

The view that the term *mā-qôm* is here technically employed is based upon a particular understanding of the nature of the narrative, namely, that it is an aetiological saga. Originally, argues Plastaras, the narrative was intended for those who went to worship God at a particular sanctuary.<sup>27</sup> But what evidence is there that such was the case? Rather than being a narrative intended for those who went to worship God at a particular sanctuary, the account as we have it in Exodus before the hand of the "critic" has mutilated it relates an event which happened once for all and which had reference to Moses alone. Its whole purpose was to reveal to Moses the fact that the God of his father had not forsaken His people, but dwelt in their midst, and that He would deliver them from the affliction in which they found themselves. This is the profound "theological" significance of the narrative.<sup>28</sup> There is not a word to indicate that this narrative seeks to explain why a particular spot was regarded as holy by the Israelites. Indeed, there is no evidence that they later did come to regard it as a sanctuary. They did not endeavor to preserve the sanctity of the spot by means of a shrine. They knew that God had appeared unto them upon the mountain, and they regarded the mountain as the mountain of God; but there is no warrant for saying that they considered the place where God appeared to Moses sacred. It is the presence

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> James Barr: *Old and New in Interpretation*, New York, 1966, p. 203 complains of fundamentalism that it has produced no really interesting discussion of biblical interpretation. Two questions arise. First of all, one may well wonder just how much "fundamentalist" exegetical literature Barr has read. All who believe in the infallibility of Scripture as a special revelation of God belong in one camp as over against those who espouse the principles of destructive criticism. Are the studies of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Kuyper, Warfield, Machen, Murray, to name but a few, uninteresting? Secondly, who is to decide what is interesting and what is not? To the present writer, the revelation at the burning bush is not merely interesting but profoundly rich in saving significance, whereas some of the modern "scholarly" discussions are dry and wearisome. Once one departs from the view that the Bible is a revelation from God, his "theological" interpretations in the deep sense cannot be very exciting, for they are not true.

of God which renders the place holy, and the putting off of the shoes is intended as a recognition of that fact. Removing the sandals is a sign of reverence to God, whose presence sanctifies the place of His appearance to Moses.

According to modern negative criticism, verse 5 is attributed to J and verse 6 to E. Yet how needless such a partition is! Verse 5 follows naturally from verse 4b. Moses has responded to God's call, and now God warns him of the sacredness of the place, thus preparing him for the revelation of the identity of the One who speaks from the bush. Very striking and remarkable is the identification that God gives, "I am the god of thy father". It is the singular which stands out as unusual. Generally, this is interpreted in a collective sense, as referring to the patriarchs as a group. The Kittel Bible, with its customary disregard of the significance of Masoretic Hebrew, simply proposes an emendation to the plural.<sup>29</sup> With such an expedient we cannot rest satisfied since it is too facile a solution of the difficulty. One possible explanation of the singular is that it was deliberately employed to call attention to the fact that God was the God of the patriarchs.

In patriarchal times this type of expression was employed fairly frequently. It was used, for example, in Genesis 31:5, 29, 42, 53, where we find such phrases as "the god of my father", "the god of your father", and "the god of their father". Cf. also Genesis 43:23; 50:17; 46:3.<sup>30</sup> Recently Professor Haran has called attention to this expression. According to him it indicates the household god.<sup>31</sup> We can agree to the extent that there was something very intimate about the phrase; it pointed to the god whom one's father worshipped, and it would seem that this was a patriarchal mode of designating God. When, therefore, the Lord made known to Moses that He was the God of Moses' father, He

<sup>29</sup> *I. e.*, אֱלֹהֵיךָ.

<sup>30</sup> I have discussed the significance of these phrases in "The God of the Fathers", *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. III, No. 1, 1940, pp. 25-40. This article seeks to evaluate the views of the late Albrecht Alt concerning patriarchal religion.

<sup>31</sup> Menahem Haran: "The Religion of the Patriarchs: An Attempt at a Synthesis", *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, Vol. IV, Leiden, 1965, pp. 30-55.

immediately directed Moses' thought to the time of the ancestors. To rule out all question of doubt the Lord immediately adds, "the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob". Thus Moses was reminded of the promises made to the patriarchs individually. The God of the patriarchs was alive in the midst of His people, mindful of His promises and ready to bring deliverance.

In the history of redemption a pivotal point has been reached. The God of patriarchal promises is a God who has the power to deliver His people from bondage. He has control over all of His creation, and this fact He manifests by His appearance in the burning bush. He is a God who can perform wonders, a God of the miraculous.

It would seem that God had appeared in some visible way to Moses, for Moses responds to the revelation by hiding his face, probably wrapping it in his mantle, as Elijah had done (1 Kings 19:13), for he fears to look upon God. In this action, Moses gives expression to his own unworthiness and sinfulness, for he realizes that he is in the presence of the holy God of his people. To look upon his God irreverently would result in death. He is convinced that the one who speaks from the bush had earlier made Himself known to the patriarchs. What, however, about the people who are now in bondage in Egypt?

### THE NAME OF GOD

The narrative in Exodus is smooth and straightforward. God charges Moses to deliver the people; Moses complains of his unworthiness and receives the assurance that God will be with him. Yet, when Moses tells the people that the patriarchal God has appeared unto him and they ask His name, what shall he say unto them? As is well understood today, to the Semite the name had far deeper significance than is the case in our occidental world. With us the name is little more than a vocable; to the Semite, however, it either signified the character of a person or brought to mind something distinctive about him.<sup>32</sup> To ask for the name of God was to desire to know the nature of God.

<sup>32</sup> Thus, Moses himself received his name because he was drawn out of

When therefore the Israelites in Egypt should ask as to the name of the patriarchal God, they would want to know concerning His nature. A mere vocable would have been no sufficient answer. Was the God who made promises to the patriarchs still with His people and was he able to deliver them from their present bondage and to bring to fulfillment the ancient promises? We must keep these considerations in mind when we seek to ascertain the meaning of the name revealed to Moses.

Two basic questions call for consideration. In the first place there is the question of the philological significance of the word which we so often transliterate Yahweh.<sup>33</sup> Were we able to ascertain this precise philological significance, it would doubtless be a great boon. That, however, is a goal which apparently has not yet been attained. Nor is it really essential for an understanding of the employment of the word in this context. We must then be guided primarily by usage, in particular by the appearance of the word in this context. In the second place we must seek to ascertain the theological significance of the Name. Why did God reveal this particular Name to Moses at just this time? How does this revelation fit into the plan of redemption?

There are of course a number of views to consider, and we shall briefly mention some of them before proceeding to a discussion of the matter. According to J. Stellingwerff, the late Professor B. Holwerda took the name as signifying "I am,

---

the water יהוה־יִשְׁׁוּׁוּ. In this particular instance the significance may simply appear in the assonance, there being no attempt made at etymology. The word may be Egyptian, but it may also be, as Kitchen suggests (*The New Bible Dictionary*, London, 1962, p. 843), that the word represents an assimilated Semitic word to the Egyptian.

<sup>33</sup> For recent philological discussions of the Tetragrammaton, cf. Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-339; Wm. F. Albright: *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, Garden City, 1957, pp. 15-16, 259-263; Frank M. Cross, Jr.: "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs", *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 55, 1962, pp. 255-259; David Noel Friedmann: "The Name of the God of Moses", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 79, 1960, pp. 151-156; Gerhard von Rad: *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Vol. I, München, 1958, pp. 20, 21. Whatever may be said about the Tetragrammaton, I do not see how it can be construed as a Qal imperfect. If the *a* vowel is original, as it seems to be (cf. *Iáβε* and *יָׁׁ*), and the form is verbal, it must be Hiph'íl.



I the God who appears in action".<sup>34</sup> Rashi interpreted, "I will be what I will be", *i. e.*, more and more God's unchanging mercy and faithfulness will manifest themselves to His people.<sup>35</sup> Again, emphasis has fallen upon the thought expressed in Exodus 3:12, "Surely I shall be with thee", and the Name has been taken to indicate that God will be present with His people. It has also been held that the phrase expresses God's inscrutability. "I am what I am". Hence, it is concluded that God's being is inscrutable and man cannot penetrate it. Geerhardus Vos calls attention to what he calls the ontological view, which would render, "I, who am, (truly) am", thus expressing the fact that God is pure being.<sup>36</sup>

In his interesting discussion of the theology of Exodus, James Plastaras gives some consideration to the meaning of the Name. He feels that the translation I AM is likely to be misleading inasmuch as there is no copula verb in Hebrew. Hence, he maintains that the verb *hā-yāh* was used in the sense of being or becoming in an active or dynamic sense. The word '*eh-yeh*' he would therefore translate "I am present and ready to act".<sup>37</sup> This presence was an act of grace and not simply the immanent omnipresence of God. The Name designates God as present in power. Plastaras renders it, "I will be present (in a dynamic, active sense) wherever, whenever, and to whomever I will be present".<sup>38</sup>

In similar vein Martin Noth asserts that the verb *hyh* does not denote pure being but an "active being" and in this instance an "active being" which makes its appearance in the history of Israel.<sup>39</sup> At this point a word of caution is in order. We must remember that "activism" plays a great role in much of modern theology and philosophy. Karl Barth has given great impetus to this conception by identifying God's

<sup>34</sup> J. Stellingwerff: *Oorsprong en toekomst van de creatieve mens*, Amsterdam, 1966, p. 122. Holwerda's words are "Ik ben, ik de handelend optredende God". The reference is from *Dictaten*, I, Aflevering 2, Kampen, 1961, a work which I have not been able to obtain.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Soncino*, p. 215.

<sup>36</sup> Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-134, gives a survey of some significant views.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 86-100.

<sup>38</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

being with his act. "God is who he is", says Barth, "in his act of revelation".<sup>40</sup> This idea that God is to be identified with his act is very prevalent today.

Yet this activistic emphasis is certainly not biblical. The modern depreciation of metaphysics is not based upon Divine revelation. We cannot therefore be satisfied with the designation "active being" in distinction from "pure being". The God of whom Exodus speaks is not the god of modern theology with its Kantian foundation, but the ever living and true, Triune God of Holy Scripture.

Anyone who studies the revelation given to Moses must realize the difficulty involved in seeking to set forth the precise significance of the Name. At the same time there are certain indications in the Scriptures themselves which will help us arrive at an understanding. The ancient versions which rendered *I am who I am* have hit upon something significant in the revelation, namely, the fact that the Name does serve to express God's aseity.<sup>41</sup>

With this conviction in mind we may again look at Exodus. If we take the text seriously we are compelled to recognize that the One to whom Moses speaks is a Being distinct from Moses. He is designated with the definite article, *The God*. He is, in other words, the true God, the only God, the God who exists. To this God Moses speaks. Emphasis is placed upon metaphysics. The God with whom Moses converses exists. He is. And what Moses would know is the Name of this God with whom he is speaking.

Verse thirteen prepares for the later revelation of chapter six, verse three, where God says to Moses that by His Name Yahweh He was not known to the patriarchs. What He means

<sup>40</sup> Karl Barth: *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II:1, p. 293. "Darum muss das unsere erste und entscheidende Umschreibung des Satzes «Gott ist: sein: «Gott ist, der er ist, in der Tat seiner Offenbarung». And again: "Aber eben das Sein Gottes umschreiben wir, indem wir es als Gottes Wirklichkeit bezeichnen, als Gottes Sein in der Tat, nämlich in der Tat seiner Offenbarung, in welcher das Sein Gottes seine Realität bezeugt: nicht nur seine Realität für uns — das freilich auch! — sondern zugleich und eben so seine eigene, innere, eigentliche Realität, hinter der und über der es keine andere gibt". How different this is from the biblical doctrine of God!

<sup>41</sup> Thus, the Vulgate, *Dixit Deus ad Moysen: EGO SUM QUI SUM. Ait: Sic dices filiis Israel: QUI EST, misit me ad vos.*

was that in the character of *yhwh* He was not known to the fathers. Clearly the verse does not mean that the patriarchs had not heard the vocable *YHWH*. As Professor Kitchen rightly says, "This major prop of the documentary theorists is now definitely swept away, no matter how unwilling they may be to recognize the fact".<sup>42</sup> The purpose of the revelation now given is to make known the significance of the Name *YHWH*.

With these thoughts in mind we may look again at the third chapter of Exodus. In itself the phrase '*eh-yeh 'ašer 'eh-yeh*' may be translated, "I shall be who I shall be", as Aquila and Theodotion do render it.<sup>43</sup> From other considerations, however, it would seem that in this context the future is not intended, but rather the present. This is also the force of the word '*eh-yeh*' taken alone.

In itself the verb *hā-yāh* may express pure existence. When it is followed by the preposition Lamed, it is best rendered into English, *become*. This distinction, it would seem, is rather consistently followed. Thus, in Genesis 1:2 "the earth WAS desolation and waste", does not refer to the earth becoming such but rather simply states a condition existing in past time. Here the idea of becoming is wholly missing. The same is true in the phrase, "And his wife looked from behind him, and she was a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26). The Hebrew with its expression of instantaneousness is far stronger than the English. On the other hand, when the preposition is employed, the word is rightly translated "become". In Exodus 6:7, for example, we should render, "And I shall take you to me for a people, and I shall be to you for God (*i. e.*, I shall become your God) and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt". The idea of activism, therefore, is not necessarily inherent in the verb itself.

<sup>42</sup> Supplement to the *Theological Students' Fellowship Bulletin*, Summer, 1964, pp. ii, iii. Cf. W. J. Martin: *Stylistic Criteria and the Analysis of the Pentateuch*, 1955; J. A. Motyer: *The Revelation of the Divine Name*, 1959, pp. 11-17; and R. D. Wilson: "Critical Note on Exodus vi. 3", *Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. 22, 1924, pp. 108-119.

<sup>43</sup> ἔσομαι (ἐς) ἔσομαι. Cf. Fredericus Field: *Origenis Hexaplorum Quae Supersunt*, Tomus I, Hildesheim, 1964, p. 85.

We may consequently render *I am who I am* as the Vulgate has done. The phrase expresses the aseity of God; it tells us what His true nature is. Despite the activism and dynamism of modern theology, there is good warrant and evidence for insisting that this concept I AM is present in the verbal form, 'eh-yeh. This is not to say that the form in itself might not be rendered I SHALL BE, but the interpretation which adhered to the word from the first is one which expresses God's aseity. Thus, the Greek has translated THE BEING ONE (ὁ ὢν).<sup>44</sup> It is this concept which also underlies and forms the basis for such expressions as "I am the LORD". Indeed, the purpose of Moses' ministry is that both the Israelites and the Egyptians may know that "I am the LORD". We meet this emphasis again in the second part of Isaiah when the Lord says, for example, "For I the LORD am your God", or "I am the LORD thy God" (Isaiah 41:13). The frequent assertion in these chapters of Isaiah's prophecy that "I am the LORD" clearly harks back to the revelation of the NAME given at Sinai. When we come to the New Testament, we find that Jesus Christ went to the heart of the question with His assertion: "Before Abraham was I AM".<sup>45</sup> Here the very essence of the NAME is expressed. 'Eh-yeh is the BEING ONE, He who IS. And now we can see the significance of the sentence, "I am who I am". God is the BEING ONE, and therefore He is ever the same; inasmuch as He alone is eternal, forever the same, He alone is the BEING ONE. Augustine has well brought out the thought: "Quid est ego sum qui sum, nisi aeternus sum. Quid est ego sum qui sum, nisi mutari non possum".<sup>46</sup> Malachi evidently reflected upon this passage in Exodus when he wrote, "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed".<sup>47</sup>

To stress the fact that the aseity of God is present in this remarkable word has been necessary. It has particularly

<sup>44</sup> Codex B. ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν.

<sup>45</sup> In the Gospel of John particularly, our Lord seems to have dwelt upon this passage. Cf. John 6:48, 51; 8:58; 10:9, 11; 11:25, etc.

<sup>46</sup> The passage is given in full in Hengstenberg: *Dissertations on the Genuineness of the Pentateuch*, Vol. I, Edinburgh, MDCCCXLVII, p. 262.

<sup>47</sup> Malachi 3:6.

been necessary in the light of the terrific power that the theology of dynamism and activism have exerted upon the interpretation of the Bible in recent days. Against that influence we do protest, for we feel that it is a baneful one. Instead of allowing the Bible to speak for itself, it seeks to compel the Bible to speak with its own voice.

At the same time we realize full well that what we have hitherto said does not do full justice to the revelation of the NAME. The whole context precludes the idea that the '*eh-yeh*' is an impersonal, hard, abstract substance, somewhat like Aristotle's unmoved mover or the hard-rock Allah of the Koran. The concern of the people in asking after the Name of God was to discover what relation this God sustained to themselves. Of what help would He be in this very present time of trouble? Unless the revelation concerns itself with the question of the people and offers them a satisfying answer — that is, not necessarily an answer that will satisfy them, but an answer which in itself is satisfactory — it becomes a mockery. The people were not interested merely in a question of metaphysics; they were interested above all in the practical matter of how the One who claimed to be the God of the Fathers could be of aid to them.

In the light of this fact we must note that the revelation expressed in the word '*eh-yeh*' and also in '*yah-weh*' makes clear that the idea of pure, unchangeable being is no mere abstract concept but is something quite practical. In wondrous grace God reveals His nature to man in so far as it determines what God is for His people. Thus in the Name the people would have a pledge and earnest of the gracious deliverance which God alone could bring and would bring to them.

The very fact that God speaks makes clear that He is no mere impersonal force. Rather, as this context compels one to recognize, He is the living and true God. In contrast to the idols which had no life and could not move, Yahweh is the eternal, living One. He changes not, yet He is living and can reveal Himself to His creation. He will make known to Moses and to the children of Israel what kind of God He is by means of the deeds which He will perform in their midst and by means of the words which He will speak unto them. These words and deeds are such that only one who in all His attributes and

perfections is infinite, eternal and unchangeable can perform them. In His revelation the *I AM* makes Himself known to His people. Thus, He declares to the Israelites, "Ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Exodus 6:7b). As a result of the revelation of power — a revelation accompanied by words — God's people would know that the One who had delivered them was no mere idol, the creation of men's hands, but the eternal, ever living one, the true Creator of heaven and earth, who did with His creation according to His will. Such a God they would and should worship. Indeed, this was to be the result of the revelation, "Ye shall worship God upon this mountain" (Exodus 3:12).

A further point remains to be noted. God declares, "This is My Name for ever, and this is My memorial unto all generations". By the use of the word NAME reference is had to the objective revelation of the divine nature. When God wrought mighty wonders, there would be objectively displayed the divine majesty and glory of the ONE who IS. Likewise the word MEMORIAL referred to the subjective recognition of that divine nature upon the part of man. Thus, when God displayed His power in redemption the Israelites would recognize that the One whose glory was thus displayed was the LORD, the eternal one, "who changeth never".

At this point, however, a minor problem arises. That the Israelites would know that Yahweh had delivered them is easily understandable. He had revealed Himself to them, both in word and in deed, and we may not doubt that He Himself would have made them willing and able to believe in Him. What, however, shall we say about the Egyptians? The Israelites will know that Yahweh is their God, but the Egyptians are said merely to know that Yahweh has brought judgment upon them. The Egyptians would have known that the God of the Hebrews had brought judgment upon them and that He was far more powerful than their own gods. As to the rich meaning of the NAME which Israel could know, we may be sure that Egypt did not have such knowledge. At the same time they would know that the One who spoke to Moses was Yahweh. Judgment is not without meaning,

and when the final judgment falls, the wicked will acknowledge that God is just.

Thus at the burning bush God gave to Moses the revelation of His NAME. In His historical revelations He is absolutely independent of His creation, the self-existent one, who manifests in deeds of wonder the nature of His being expressed in His Name. Thus, in a certain sense, we may agree with Holwerda's translation, "I am, I the God who appears in action". Yet, as quoted by Stellingwerff, this does not go far enough. At the burning bush there appeared to Moses One who is eternal, who changeth not, who depends not upon His creation, but in sovereign and supreme majesty, exists independently of that creation. He, the BEING ONE, is unchangeable; yet He is the living and true God. In His revelation of deliverance He displays the glory of His majesty, the blessed truth that He alone is the I AM.

Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.